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Bjarne Thorup Thomsen:

Comparative Considerations:

Lagerlöf, Andersen – and the British Perspective

1.

On either side of the so-called Modern Breakthrough in Scandinavian literature of the 1870s and 1880s there are some notable similarities – as well as direct influences – between national icons and world literature writers Hans Christian Andersen and Selma Lagerlöf. The work of both writers combines a commitment to the ‘real’ with a recurring interest in the imagined and the fantastical. It challenges the boundaries between genres and between fictional and factual writing, favouring hybrid forms. It features play with perspective, with scale, with self, and with text itself. In short, neither writer is fully committed to the ‘solidity’ and seriousness of realism (as criticised, for example, by Franco Moretti (2006) and Fredric Jameson (2006: 112-13)) – that hallmark writing mode of the Modern Breakthrough. Lagerlöf scholar Vivi Edström summarises the similarities in the following way: ‘Något fundamentalt gemensamt [...] är deras sätt att svinga sig mellan liv och död, dröm och verklighet, kroppsligt och andligt. Båda intresserade sig för det som finns “på den andra sidan”’ (Edström 2005: 80). We can add that this attraction to the ‘beyond’ also manifests itself in a non-mystical, geo-cultural manner, as a focus on mobility and porous borders, as an interest in ‘peripheries’, and as an inclination towards comparing, ‘translating’ and fusing places. Both writers combine a national interest with a transnational sensibility, including a concern for a wider literary market. The resulting expansive and experimental texts were, however, typically met with a contemporary criticism which advocated ‘confinement’ in various ways.

2.

Lagerlöf reflected on her literary relationship with Andersen on several occasions, most notably in a (meta-)fictional response from 1930. On 30 March that year the Danish newspaper *Berlingske Tidende* marked Andersen’s 125th anniversary (2 April) by printing tributes to the writer from a multitude of international cultural figures, including Lagerlöf, over several pages of its Sunday issue. The paper emphasises and emulates the global dimension of Andersen’s activity: ‘Vi fik den Tanke at gaa ud i den vide Verden der hvor han

selv saa gerne færdedes for at plukke Blomster til Hans Christian Andersens Mindedag' (Holmqvist 2005: 274). Lagerlöf's contribution, entitled 'Den vita fågeln', is a subtle meditation on, and attempted resolution of, the anxiety of influence. The main motif of the text is its eponymous bird, white, tiny and mysterious, which visits the fields of Mårbacka, Lagerlöf's rural home in the region of Värmland, closely connected with her authorship by contemporary criticism and by herself. The narrator realises the merits of the bird motif as literary material, but 'resists' using it from fear of plagiarising the modern master of the animal tale:

Sedan dess har det flera gånger varit min avsikt att skriva en liten historia om den vita fågeln [...], men vid varje försök, jag gör, kommer jag att tänka på honom, som diktade om *den fula ankungen*. Jag tycker mig måla med lånade färger, och jag lägger pennan ifrån mig. [Lagerlöf 2005 [1930]: 275]

In the conclusion of the brief piece the motif of the bird is developed into a metaphor for the fairy tale writer himself. While celebrating and rewarding her prominent predecessor (albeit with an interesting stylistic hesitation), Lagerlöf does this by poignantly reversing the direction of influence, as she donates the potential fairy tale topic to her deceased Danish colleague:

Nu, då hans minne skall firas – ja, jag vet inte rätt, hur jag skall uttrycka det, men i stället för att bringa honom blommor eller annan hyllning, ville jag lägga ner på hans grav detta lilla ämne till ett äventyr, skänka det till den danske sagofågeln, som än i dag flyger fram över de kalla och mörka nordanlanden, bärande med sig på glittrande vingar det solljusa skämtet, den gnistrande kvickheten, den värmande visheten. [Lagerlöf 2005 [1930]: 275]

3.

In the end vision of the celebratory text the writer-bird's trajectory and its effects of illuminating and vitalising the northern nations are conceived as a wonderful airborne journey. This could be said to echo the bird's-eye discovery of the nation as magical place presented in Lagerlöf's most popular work *Nils Holgerssons underbara resa genom Sverige* (1906-07), a text whose Andersen connections are widely considered, also by Lagerlöf herself. In 1941, the year after Lagerlöf's death, the journal *Svensk Litteraturtidskrift* published a letter by her, dictated a decade earlier, but apparently never sent, which responded to claims in a study from 1930 by the critic Hilma Borelius of Andersen influences

on her work. While broadly sceptical of this notion, Lagerlöf readily acknowledges that her famous travel adventure aimed at school children was influenced by Andersen, among others: 'I Nils Holgerssons underbara resa förekommer alldeles säkert inflytande av Andersen och Topelius, och Kipling också i rätt hög grad. Då det gällde att skriva för folkets barn, ansåg jag mig böra tillgripa de bästa förebilder' (Lagerlöf 1941: 102).

A specific similarity between Andersen's Swedish travelogue, *I Sverrig*, from 1851, and *Nils Holgersson* is evident. In the prologue, 'Vi reise', of Andersen's text the notion of riding on the back of different birds – stork, swallow, gull and swan – works to display the major segments of Sweden from south to north, including those not covered in the following, more personalised account. This travel fantasy prefigures the way in which *Nils Holgersson* uses the trajectory of the flying flock, and the protagonist's panoramic gaze, to 'stitch together' the fabric of the Swedish nation.¹ The texts resemble each other, moreover, in the way in which they embrace not only the Swedish landscape, but also the country's contemporary natural-industrial complex, which is given sublime dimensions. As early as 1914, in an article in the journal *Edda. Nordisk tidsskrift for litteraturforskning*, the Danish critic Edv. Lehmann drew attention to this shared perspective on Sweden, summarising Andersen's approach thus:

Det er et af de største træk i Andersens digteriske karakter, at videnskabens og de moderne opfindelsers udvidelse af den menneskelige synskreds og magtkreds var ham et større eventyr end noget digtningen har skabt, at nutiden derved med sine uendelige perspektiver blev ham mere romantisk end selv den mest fantastiske fortid. I dette sit digtersyn drager han Sverige ind, og denne tanke beskæftiger ham stedse her paa den industrielle grund. [Lehmann 1914: 397]

The similarities notwithstanding, Lehmann is disinclined to enter into a debate about influence:

Om Selma Lagerlöf har kendt Andersen "I Sverrig" og der har bemærket det motiv, hun kom til at bygge Nils Holgersson over, er et spørgsmaal der nærmest kun har nyfigenhedens interesse. Maaske hun bevidst har taget lære af det, maaske hun aldrig har læst bogen; maaske hun har streift den engang og faaet motivet i sig uden selv at vide af det. [...] Iøvrigt har hun jo fantasi nok til selv at kunne hitte paa noget, og vi kan forssavidt lade *la question de la paternité* være udenfor. [Lehmann 1914: 399]

¹ For a fuller discussion of the national vision in *Nils Holgersson*, see Thorup Thomsen 2007.

This question was, nevertheless, approached by Swedish scholar Gunnar Ahlström in his seminal *Nils Holgersson* monograph *Den underbara resan* (1942). Ahlström argues that, while a direct influence cannot be established, an indirect connection is possible through an intermediary Swedish text, 'Det okända paradiset' (1875) by Richard Gustafsson.²

As for fairytale influences on Lagerlöf's national travel fantasy, Vivi Edström argues that it would be difficult to imagine the talking birds in *Nils Holgersson* without Andersen's anthropomorphic menagerie. Great writers, she adds, share the ability to combine space and overview with closeness to life and ground, mobility with stillness. Specifically, she highlights the tale of 'De vilde Svaner' (1838) as a text that presents sea, sky and landscape in a grand vision and powerful images which have counterparts in *Nils Holgersson* (Edström 2005: 82). In another recent study Anders Palm makes the case for a connection between Lagerlöf's small-scale, nomadic boy protagonist and Andersen's female variation of the Tom Thumb motif in 'Tommelise' (1835): 'har man en gång för sin inre blick sett Tummelisa på svalans rygg med det italienska landskapet därunder i fågelperspektiv [...], så flyter både berättelse och bild samman med Tummetotts färd över den skånska slätten' (Palm 2005: 50). Palm stresses the androgynous aspects of Andersen's text and argues that one of Danish literature's most famous female fairy tale figures gets a male Swedish counterpart/double in *Nils Holgersson*.³ The question of influence may not be possible to resolve, but the mirror effect remains (Palm 2005: 51).⁴

² Inspired by the opening of *I Sverrig*, Gustafsson's tale depicts how a small boy from Skåne is taught to appreciate the paradisaal properties of his nation by a migrating swan that carries him through the country from south to north. Gustafsson's tale was later in a slightly modified form incorporated into the then standard textbook for the teaching of Swedish at elementary school level. This textbook, in turn, was used in the preparatory classes at the school in Landskrona, Skåne, in which Lagerlöf taught for ten years (1885-95). (Ahlström 1958 [1942]: 110ff).

³ Some common ground with Palm's analysis may be found already in the above-mentioned article by Lehmann, who suggests that *Nils Holgersson* represents a shift in the world view expressed in Lagerlöf's work from male to female orientation and, in Lehmann's understanding, from Carlyle to Kipling influence: 'At et lille menneskebarn, der forvilder sig mellem dyrene, bliver adept i dyrenes visdom, saa at sige faar dyresjæl og lærer at se verden med dyrenes øjne, er jo Kiplingsk nok. Men vigtigere end dette digteriske arrangement er den moralske følge, det har paa hele bogens verdensanskuelse, og som tyder paa at Selma Lagerlöf – om under Kiplings indflydelse alene eller ført af andre strømninger i tiden? – har anlagt en anden vurdering af livet, end den, der oprindelig var ejendommelig for hendes bøger og som kulminerede i "Jerusalem". Den heltemoral, som gjorde, at hun i mere end sin pathos mindede om Carlyle og ligesom han, gjorde alvor, pietet og manddom i ordets vægtigste forstand til sit menneskeideal midt i al eventyrligheden, er veget for en kvindelig nænsomhed overfor livet og naturen, der sikkert ikke blot har børnebogen og dyremotivet til sit udgangspunkt. Der er en kendelig luftning af Indien derved' (Lehmann 1914: 405).

⁴ Palm observes that the decisive conception of *Nils Holgersson* coincided with the Andersen centenary in 1905, when a Swedish anniversary edition of his tales and stories was published, and that two years previously, in 1903, 'Tommelise' was published in the first separate Swedish edition in a series of *Svenska Folkskolans Vänners Barnböcker*. This leads Palm to reflect that it

4.

We considered above Lagerlöf's 1930 Andersen response in the light of a possible articulation of an anxiety of influence. If we compare this with Andersen's perspective, in a previous period, on peers and recognition of their impact, Palm makes the observation that Andersen tends to highlight rather than hide his sources of inspiration and canonical role models. Andersen links himself to merited authors and their motifs in order to demonstrate his own combinational and cumulative creativity. Rather than displaying any anxiety of influence, he conceives of creativity as cross-fertilisation or pollination within an aesthetics of transmutation. Thus, narrow notions of borrowing and dependency do not do justice to Andersen's literary strategy for fame. (Palm 2005: 35).

Palm's analysis is borne out not least by Andersen's novel-writing, with his fourth novel, *De to Baronesser* (1848), a particular case in point. This bears, moreover, some noteworthy similarities with Lagerlöf's anti-war novel *Bannlyst* (1918), which we shall touch on towards the end of this discussion. In the preface to the English edition of Andersen's novel, *The Two Baronesses. A Romance*, the author foregrounds his indebtedness to English and Scottish literature which has operated powerfully on his mental development, turning him at an early stage into a virtual traveller in a variety of British terrains:

I knew and loved those countries before my feet trod them. With Marryat's "Jacob Faithful," I had long before sailed up the Thames; by Dickens I was led into London's narrow lanes, and I listened to the throbbing hearts there; and in "Night and Morning" Bulwer opened to my gaze the rich landscape, with its towns, its churches, and its villages.

I was at home on Scotland's mountains, and familiar with its deep lakes, lonely paths, and ancient castles. Walter Scott's genius had wafted me thither [...].

I was intimate with Shakspeare's land and Burns' mountains before my corporeal eye beheld them; and when at length I visited them, I was not received as a stranger. [Andersen 1848, vol. I: vi]

The English edition of the novel was, interestingly, published a couple of months before the Danish 'original', and was not presented as a translated

is possible that Lagerlöf's childhood memory of the tale from readings at Mårbacka and the re-actualisation of this memory in connection with the centenary could have been contributing factors when she experienced the breakthrough in the construction of her narrative. (Palm 2005: 49).

work. On the contrary, in the preface Andersen claims or pretends that the romance is 'the first that I have myself sent into the world in the English language' (Andersen 1848, vol. I: v).

A state-of-the-nation narrative, the novel explores the geographical and socio-cultural diversity of the Danish monarchy in the nineteenth century. In Andersen's own characterisation, '[i]t is not Italy's beauty, and the manners and customs of her people which are here depicted [as in his breakthrough novel *Improvisatoren* (1835)]: it is Danish nature – the life and the world around me – in the land wherein I live.' (Andersen 1848, vol. I: vii). While the novel was published in a period of disputed Danish territoriality to the south, culminating in the first Dano-Prussian War of 1848-1851 about the control of the duchies of Schleswig-Holstein, it resists a nationalistic approach to the border question. Instead, the novel's notion of the nation is one informed by influx and outreach, not least towards the British Isles (but not to the exclusion of German influence). Its desire to delineate the realm not only in 'centre' terms but also in terms of its porous periphery is demonstrated by the its middle and most original part, which focuses on the 'debatable' southern borderland, especially the extreme location of the North Frisian islands off the west coast of Schleswig.

In this North Sea setting Andersen makes a virtue of the influence of Walter Scott, entering into a textual play with one of his best known works. With more than thirty Scott translations published in Denmark between 1822 and 1830 (Dal 1997: 280), the Scottish writer was a significant source of inspiration for the rise of the Danish novel. Although not a historical novelist himself, Andersen was no exception to this influence. In *The Two Baronesses*, the Scott novel is poignantly put on display for the young female protagonist, Elisabeth, and the reader alike in a scene that reflects the international literary traffic of the period and the degree of Scott's dissemination. As Elisabeth approaches a local post office, she makes the following discovery: 'a small book-case hung outside, for it was also a circulating library; several books lay there with the title-page disclosed, and the first she accidentally saw was, "The Heart of Mid-Lothian," by Walter Scott' (Andersen 1848, vol. II: 45). This showcasing of Scott then impacts directly on plot development in Andersen's novel as Elisabeth is inspired to re-enact Jeanie Dean's journey from Edinburgh to London by travelling from her outlying island to Copenhagen with the ambition of persuading the king to release her friend (whom she mistakenly believes is imprisoned there). Thus, Andersen's novel superimposes Scott's canonical trajectory onto the Danish terrain, while explicitly acknowledging the source text by letting it leave a lasting imprint on the consciousness of the main character:

There was nothing overstrained in her course of thought, and the determination to which it led; and we shall understand this, when we remember how entirely she lived in the realm of illusion – how she knew the world only through the medium of books. Walter Scott's novels were declared to be reality itself – historically true ... [Andersen 1848, vol. II: 47-48]

In this openly intertextual way Andersen's text thematises the interconnection between national geographies, as well as between the real and the fictional, allowing his novel's fictional 'reality' to imitate actual fiction writing, while also gesturing towards his British audience and their literary horizon.

In a major review (1849) of *De to Baronesser* in the journal *Nord og Syd* the prominent Danish critic and writer M. A. Goldschmidt sees the referencing of Scott as an example of the overreliance of Andersen's novel-writing on immediate reality, just like the novel's wider prioritisation of the British public and the resultant exterior, 'ethnographical' approach to Danish conditions are considered an aesthetical weakness:

Det er overhovedet et Uheld, at Bogen er skreven med den bestemte Tanke for Øie, at den først skulde overgives til det engelske Publikum; thi Andersen har i sin Godmodighed troet at burde komme dette imøde med adskillige ethnographiske Notitser og med bredere Skildringer af danske Forhold, end danske eller blot æsthetiske Læsere behøve, ligesom han ogsaa siger Engelskmænd, Skotter, Irlændere endeel Forbindtligheder. [Goldschmidt 1997 [1849]: 264]

Goldschmidt's concerns echo those of the philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, whose first published work, *Af en endnu Levendes Papirer* (1838), formulates a Hegel-inspired critique of Andersen's underdevelopment as a novel-writer. Among the pathological patterns Kierkegaard confidently claims to identify in Andersen's treatment of the novel form is the author's comparative rhetoric which prefers to perceive 'through something else', as exemplified by the similes his texts establish between Danish places and European prestige locations (typically known from canonical literature). In Kierkegaard's interpretation this comparative method only results in representational slippages which replace real illumination and shifts the imaginative and creative effort from the writer to the reader (Kierkegaard 1872 [1838]: 27-28). This criticism does not take into account, of course, the degree to which Andersen's texts attempt to cater for diverse target audiences. Overall, Goldschmidt and

Kierkegaard agree that Andersen's novels are too atomistic, too restless, too everyday, and too close to travel-writing to provide the 'true' and totalising insight they expect from the form.

The generic benchmarking that underlies this critique is, of course, not generally borne out by current understandings of the novel as a hybrid form. Klaus P. Mortensen, Andersen expert and main editor of the bicentenary scholarly edition of the author's collected works (2003-07), argues that the very de-centeredness and multiple plot strands of the Andersen novel contribute to making it alive to the modern condition, and that the author was a key innovator and experimenter in Danish novel-writing. With reference to *De to Baronesser*, Mortensen disputes the notion that the Andersen novel does not deliver insight and debate essential ideas. He identifies this text as the first *Bildungsroman* in Danish literature with female protagonists and goes on to consider the impact on the text of the Danish transition from absolutism to (limited) democracy which coincided, in 1848-49, with the publication of the novel. He argues, moreover, that the political and gendered perspectives are connected: if conjoined, the life stories of the two eponymous heroines – who rise, in separate generations, from poor and exposed beginnings – suggest a supra-individual, historical development towards a democratic outlook, as well as the birth of the modern, female, individual. The vision of the woman which Elisabeth, the younger heroine, represents is a progressive one: while retaining the beauty, innocence and purity of the *Biedermeier* female ideal, she is at the same time issued with curiosity, will power, courage and a desire to explore. These attributes are developed in an interplay with the innovative and liminal North Frisian setting (Mortensen 2007: 120-21).

5.

Just as *De to Baronesser*, Lagerlöf's 1918 novel *Bannlyst* is characterised by a westward drift of its imagination which serves to unsettle it as a national narrative. Like Andersen's novel it is noteworthy for its unconventional construction of gender. It is similarly informed by an overt ideological interest. And it, too, is criticised for its 'deformity'.

To a degree *Bannlyst* draws on the national perspective on place which a decade or so earlier had been developed in sophisticated forms in *Nils Holgersson*. Central to its plot structure is the story of marital complications that involves a bride from the Swedish north and a groom from the region of Bohuslän on the west coast of the country, more than 1000 kilometres south. In *Atlas of the European Novel* Franco Moretti discusses, with reference to Jane Austen's England, the role played by marriage between partners from different

parts of a country in constructing the nation as home-land in the nineteenth-century novel. This national marriage market requires of woman in particular a new mobility (Moretti 2009 [1998]: 17-18). In *Bannlyst* the paradigm of the female marital journey is activated, but also problematised.

As Ulla-Britta Lagerroth has documented in her seminal *Motiv- och idéstudier i Selma Lagerlöfs 10-talsdiktning* (1963: 273-74), the final version of *Bannlyst* forges together heterogeneous stories. The marital narrative is framed by a storyline that tracks (first in retrospect, then directly) the transnational trajectory of Sven Elversson: adopted as a nine-year old from the Bohuslän archipelago into an English family, participating as a grown-up in a British polar expedition, accused, alongside the other explorers, of cannibalism and forced to return to Sweden where he is driven into isolation by public rejection but eventually redeemed. The addition of Sven's story works to disturb the notion of the national marriage in that an extra-marital attraction develops between this transnational hero and the heroine. As Vivi Edström accounts for in her comprehensive study of Lagerlöf's life and work, *Livets vågspel* (2002: 452-53), the addition is motivated, moreover, by the ideological turn the novelistic project took in 1918 towards accomplishing an anti-war text. Responding to her own concern that the context of war called her role as author and the value of 'pure' literature into question, as well as to the expectation that she should produce a 'book for world improvement' (Edström 2002: 452), Lagerlöf employed the motif of cannibalism first and foremost as a conceptualisation of modern warfare. The novel's method now became profoundly comparative in nature, aiming to engineer a specific reader response in which a sense of nausea and moral rejection is re-routed from Sven's minor crime to the political field of military force. In a letter of 19 October 1918 to her friend and collaborator Valborg Olander Lagerlöf spells out the novel's didactic strategy:

Därför ville jag skriva en bok, som skulle säga i sin första del, se så stark är äcklets makt och i sin andra säga: Lagg kriget och vad till kriget hör under äcklets bann. Förr i världen bannlystes syndare, gör detsamma med kriget. [...] Det hjälper ju inte att tala vackert med människor, men visa dem, att man betraktar dem, som människoätare, du skall få se, att det tar. Nåja litet finare får man framställa tesen. [Lagerlöf 2006: 145]

The execution of this strategy climaxes in maritime scenes towards the end of the novel. As in Andersen's novel the North Sea setting is key to the transnational agenda of *Bannlyst*. One of the primary sources of inspiration for the text was the author's personal experience of the gruesome effects of the

Battle of Jutland between Britain and Germany on 31 May-1 June 1916, the largest naval battle of the First World War, while she was holidaying on the Bohuslän coast. Vivi Edström argues that the trauma of witnessing scores of corpses drifting towards land in the aftermath of the Battle of Jutland (with events closely monitored in newspapers as well) was decisive for Lagerlöf's definitive position against war – war as abominable, devoid of any lure of heroism it might have had (Edström 2002: 453). These traumatic 'tourist' impressions are in the text developed into shocking close-up scenes, aimed at imprinting into the mind of the reader the full extent and fine detail of the human disaster, on which the nation cannot turn its back. The novel insistently shifts its perspective off shore, away from the national terrain, into the centre of the crisis. In this marine environment the macabre bodily performance of the masses of the living dead riding on the waves is displayed as a graphic indication of the 'cannibalism' of war. Fragmented body parts and empty eye sockets are foregrounded. The passages in question demonstrate some of the uncanny devices of literature which Sigmund Freud explores in his seminal essay on 'Das Unheimliche', first published at approximately the same time (1919) as *Bannlyst*.

In the novel's wider vision the whole Bohuslän community comes together in honouring the rescued dead, German and British alike, in a mass-burial ceremony, and in accepting the stigmatised Elversson. Even after death one of the rescued bodies plays an 'active' and constructive part in plot development, as the proof of the protagonist's non-involvement in cannibalism consists of a letter found in the pocket of a dead British soldier and former participant in the Polar expedition – an additional example of the international information flow that characterises the novel.

Overall, the novel is an innovative artistic response to the consequences of global territorial conflict as well as an experimental enquiry into the ambiguities of family and gender.

6.

The German scandinavianist Walter Berendsohn, who was the first to publish a major monograph on Lagerlöf in 1927, criticises the novel for its perceived lack of cohesion and for its 'peripheral' perspective on the war experience. As a further example, perhaps, of confining criticism Berendsohn claims that the horror of war is a topic that lies beyond the scope of Lagerlöf's world view:

Aber das Mißlingen ist mehr als ein Zufall. Nur ein unbeteiligter Zuschauer kann in das gewaltige Problem des Weltkrieges andere Motivreihen

störend hineinmengen. Selma Lagerlöf bleibt der Wahrheit treu, wenn sie nur Ergebnisse des Krieges schildert, wie sie in einem neutralen Lande ans Ufer gespült werden. Sie hat dem Krieg nicht ins versteinemde Schreckensantlitz gesehen. Wenn es ihr beschieden gewesen wäre, ihn selbst zu erleben, hätte sie das Erlebnis gestaltend bewältigen können? Keinesfalls in Rahmen ihrer Weltanschauung [...] [Berendsohn 1927]

In terms of their experimental writing and the limiting criticism it receives, Andersen and Lagerlöf resemble each other. *Bannlyst* may be linked to Andersen's fairy tale of 'The Little Mermaid' (1837) (and to the mermaid statue, by Erik Eriksen, which was displayed at Langelinie in Copenhagen in 1913). Both texts depict women who are torn between sea and soil and display nomadic tendencies. Andersen's tale, in turn, has its own precursor text, his drama 'Agnete og Havmanden' (1833). In this, the protagonist Agneta is born on the wreck of a ship in the same tidal setting which figures so prominently in *The Two Baronesses*. This, then, completes a Scandinavian literary circle of sorts.

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